

ANALYSIS

“An Awakening” (1919)

from *Winesburg, Ohio*

Sherwood Anderson

(1876-1941)

“George Willard’s maturity has...been coming on for a long time. In ‘An Awakening’ (his), for instance, he has been shown (1) trying to get ‘into touch with something orderly and big that swings through the night like a star,’ (2) ‘muttering words’ into the darkness, and (3) feeling himself ‘oddly detached and apart from all life.’ But these inchoate impulses, although more or less in the right direction, are quickly brought to an end by his foolish involvement with the milliner Belle Carpenter. By the time of ‘Sophistication’ he is older and wiser. His mother’s death has intervened. It is the death, no doubt, that enables him now ‘for the first time [to] take the backward view of life,’ to realize with the ‘sadness of sophistication’ that ‘in spite of all the stout talk of his fellows he must live and die in uncertainty.’ The point of passage from adolescence to maturity is thus defined as the moment one ‘hears death calling’; and the universal response to an awareness of this moment is to ‘want to come close to some other human.’ But not too close; wherein lies the moral of the story.”

Edwin Fussell

“*Winesburg, Ohio: Art and Isolation*”

Modern Fiction Studies VI

(Summer 1960)

“In both ‘An Awakening’ and ‘Sophistication,’ George’s relation with a woman is complicated by the involvement of another man, though, significantly, Ed Handby in the former story is laconic, direct, and highly physical, while the college instructor in the latter is voluble, devious, and pompously intellectual. In both, too, the final scene takes place on the hill leading up to the fairgrounds, close, incidentally, to the place where Kate Swift tried to explain to George the difficulties that beset the dedicated writer. Yet the two stories have quite different, if complementary, conclusions.

As George and Belle Carpenter walk up the hill in the final scene of ‘An Awakening,’ he feels no more sympathy for her, has no more understanding of her needs, than he had for Louise Trunnion, but before this last walk he has experienced an exaltation that keeps him from any fear of masculine incompetence. Earlier that January night a kind of mystical revelation has come to him when it seems as though ‘some voice outside himself’ announced the thoughts in his mind: ‘I must get myself into touch with something orderly and big that swings through the night like a star.’ Unlike the situation at the end of ‘Nobody Knows,’ George actually ‘hears’ the external voice, and the voice is now the positive one of inspiration, which has replaced the negative one of conscience. Thereafter he talks volubly to Belle, as he had to Louise; but when in ‘An Awakening’ his mind runs off into words,’ he believes that Belle will recognize the new force in him and will at once surrender herself to his masculine power.

Now, in actual fact an insistence on the necessity of universal order—“There is a law for armies and for men too,” George asserts—is a characteristic of Anderson’s own thinking particularly as expressed in the novel, *Marching Men*, which preceded the Winesburg tales in composition, and in the poems, *Mid-American Chants*, which followed; yet George makes this concept ridiculous at the moment because of his intense self-centeredness about his inspiration. As Kate Swift would have said, he is still playing with words, a destructive procedure for the artistic personality as well as for the non-artistic one. Holding the quite uninterested Belle in his arms, he whispers large words into the darkness, until the passionate, non-verbalizing Ed Handby throws him aside, takes Belle by the arm, and marches off. George is left angered, humiliated, and disgustedly disillusioned with his moment of mystic insight.”

Walter B. Rideout

“*The Simplicity of Winesburg, Ohio*”

Shenandoah XIII
(Spring 1962)

Michael Hollister (2015)